DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 475 624 PS 031 266

AUTHOR	Sandberg, Anette; Samuelsson, Ingrid Pramling
TITLE	Prechool Teachers' Play Experiences Then and Now.
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	18p.; In: Early Childhood Research & Practice: An Internet Journal on the Development, Care, and Education of Young Children, Spring 2003; see PS 031 261. Published bi-annually.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v5n1/sandberg.html.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Early Experience; Foreign Countries; *Play; *Preschool Teachers; Social Change; Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS	Sweden

ABSTRACT

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ED 475 624

ECRP
Early Childhood Research & Practice

Spring 2003
Volume 5 Number 1

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Preschool Teachers' Play Experiences Then and Now

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Anette Sandberg
Malardalens University

Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson
Göteborg University

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Anette Sandberg

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Abstract

Many preschool teachers recognize the importance of play for children's development and learning and emphasize play in their classrooms. This paper explores how they remember their own childhood play and how they perceive children's play today. Twenty Swedish preschool teachers were interviewed regarding their views of play. Two characteristic perspectives were identified—the idealized and the pragmatic. Findings suggest that the idealized perspective was more common than the pragmatic among the preschool teachers interviewed. Two different themes from childhood stand out as significant in the comparison of play in the past to the role of play today: time for play and the effect of media on play.

Introduction

For many people in the world, especially in Western societies, childhood is closely related to play (Woodhead, 1996). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm) suggests that there is collective agreement about the value of play for young children, stating that a child should not have to work but should have opportunities for play and leisure activities.

In the context of preschool education, the importance of play is generally accepted. Although theories of children's learning have changed throughout history, in most theories, play is viewed as an act of learning or as an object of learning (i.e., play means something by itself and therefore is of value for children's well-being) (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund-Carlsson, 2003). Play in preschools has been called "free play" to emphasize that children's role-play is partly free from the teachers' planning and involvement. This view is based on a maturity perspective of child development, where "the natural child" is seen as being nourished by his or her own creativity in play (Bruner, 1996). Maturation is viewed as the basis for children's learning (Sommer, 1997).

The new preschool curriculum in Sweden today does not separate play and learning activities, as was the case previously (Ministry of Education, 1998); instead, the new preschool curriculum integrates play and learning. Play is viewed as necessary for children to make sense of the surrounding world. This new perspective on play and learning represents a paradigm shift. Many of the words used to characterize

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play—for example, joyful, free, spontaneous, symbolic, social, and engaging—are now used to describe productive learning situations in both preschools and schools (Pramling Samuelsson, 1998).

That the view of play and learning has changed in official documents is an established fact, but what does this change mean for preschool teachers? Preschool teachers study theories of play in their teacher education courses, but many Swedish preschools do not get high scores from pedagogues (Sheridan, 2001a; Sheridan, 2001b) when quality is evaluated with the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harmes & Clifford, 1980). A high score on this questionnaire means that the preschool has substantial and varied equipment and attributes for role-play, that play themes can continue over a long period of time, and that teachers are taking an active part in the creation and development of play.

The goal of the study described in this paper was to investigate, identify, and describe different ways that preschool teachers view play. The following assumptions guided this study:

- Play is important for young children, globally as well as nationally.
- All Swedish preschool teachers have played during their own childhoods and studied theories of play during their teacher education at the university level.
- Play is still not well developed in preschool, according to evaluations by ECERS, although it is heavily emphasized in the curriculum.
- The understanding of the significance of play today and descriptions of play could be increased by preschool teachers' examining their experience of play in their own childhoods.

These four starting points lead us to the research question: How do preschool teachers remember their own childhood play experiences, and how do they perceive children's play today?

Play and Childhood

Play

Many researchers within, for example, the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and pedagogy have been fascinated by the significance of play in childhood. Despite this interest, they have not been able to agree on a definition. For the purposes of this paper, however, it might not be essential to define play; instead, we can state that children express play in many different ways and that adults interpret what play is in many different ways. We can simply assume that all preschool teachers have an implicit or explicit picture of what play is.

Childhood

What meaning do we ascribe to the concept of childhood? There are many different perspectives on childhood—sociological, psychological, anthropological, and cultural. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Crafoord (1996) speaks about a childhood that is transformed into a personal myth and childhood events that become legends. According to Kristjánsson (1995), adults create their ideal image of their childhood. He claims that adults have unconscious assumptions rather than an objective visual picture of their own childhood. He reasons that adults, as they develop intellectual skills, overestimate and misrepresent some memories. Furthermore, adults have been influenced by religious, political, and philosophical ideas during the years when they were growing up. As a result of these factors, the childhoods that adults remember are no longer the same childhoods that they really had. Their reactions therefore are exaggerated when it comes to seeing changes concerning the way in which children grow today. Kristjánsson (1995) also states that adults' fear of change is greatest when it comes to the family, and they are therefore unable to recognize that family and childhood have always been influenced by the continuing development of society.

Halldén (2001) states that one's childhood is constructed in the moment one talks about it. From this perspective, it follows that when preschool teachers talk about their childhood, they construct their childhood. She also says, "we will understand reality through the stories about reality, which we create by

ourselves. Through stories built upon memories, both memories and history are created" (Halldén, 2001, p. 13, authors' translation).

How we interpret experiences from our childhood depends on what theoretical perspective we use. Many agree that childhood is important to an individual's development, and that we are influenced by everything that we have done—for example, which play experiences we have had. Although the past cannot be changed, we can influence our conceptions of the meaning of our earlier experiences through knowledge and by the changing of attitudes. Thus, it can be of interest to find out how preschool teachers talk about their own childhood play and how they view the children's play that they encounter in their classrooms.

Method

This study focused on preschool teachers' conceptions of play. The study was qualitative and inspired by the phenomenographical research tradition. The purpose was to identify and describe different ways that people conceive, understand, and experience phenomena in the world around them. By characterizing the meaning of preschool teachers' statements, this study investigated the implication of play "then and now." Variations in conceptions were the focus of the study (Marton, 1981, 1994; Pramling, 1983, 1988, 1994; Larsson, 1986; Alexandersson, 1994; Marton & Pang, 1999; Marton & Booth, 2000). The important part of the analysis was the comparison of interviewees' statements in order to find both similarities and differences in the ways people think or learn something (Marton, 1981, 1994; Marton & Booth, 2000; Pramling, 1988, 1994; Pramling Samuelsson, 1989; Larsson, 1986). The complete interview was the starting point for the interpretation and analysis, and it resulted in descriptive categories. The individuals were separated from the descriptive categories (Marton, 1981, 1994; Marton & Booth, 2000; Alexandersson, 1994); therefore, one person's comments could be assigned to several different categories.

Sample

Interviews were conducted with 20 preschool teachers. The subjects interviewed for this study held different views about play so that there was variation within the group. By doing the selection from conscious criteria, purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) and theoretical sampling (Marton & Booth, 2000) have been used. The selection process assumed variation regarding gender, age, childhood environment, siblings, own children, years of education, and work within municipal and private preschools, respectively. The advantages of this varied sample were that it allowed both extensive and comprehensive descriptions as well as maximum variation.

Interviews

The participants were contacted at the preschool teachers' workplaces with an initial call to see if they would participate. During this call, a presentation of the purpose of the study and the interview was made, and time and location for the interview were decided. Partly structured interviews were performed at the preschool teachers' workplaces. Every interview started with a description of the purpose of the study and a description of ethical rules used for research, including confidentiality, consent, information, and autonomy. Researchers also emphasized that participation in the study was voluntary (HSFR, 1999).

Using the purpose of the study as a starting point, interviewers asked the preschool teachers to speak about the following areas: memories of play experiences from their childhood, their perceptions of children's play today in preschools and in homes compared with their own experiences, and their approach to children's play in their classrooms. These questions constituted the basis for further conversation and made possible deeper discussions about play. In order to find out about the preschool teachers' perspectives, interviewers encouraged teachers to speak freely about their experiences. The interviews, which lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were tape recorded and transcribed.

Analysis

The procedure used during the analysis was inspired by the phenomenographical research tradition. First, each interview transcript was read repeatedly in order to get an overall impression and an understanding of the implication of the statements that were made. This approach resulted in a general picture of the material and highlighted some common features.

Next, an analysis of each interview was completed, including analyses of both the interviews as a whole as well as of the details of each. A data reduction was performed; that is, all quotations with expressions of opinion based on the question "How do preschool teachers experience their own childhood play, and how do they experience children's play of today?" were selected. The teachers' statements constitute the categories alluded to henceforth. Thus, different meanings from the teachers' statements were analyzed in order to attain the main categories. Based on an analysis of the content, the statements that dealt with the same meaning were collected in the same category and named. Each perspective of conceptions is described in the results (Larsson, 1986). In this analysis, a large number of significant statements appeared.

Third, the contents of the significant statements were then grouped for the total sample into "meaning units" that were, in turn, assembled into two superordinate themes.

Fourth, we studied the similarities and differences with regard to these meaning units in each superordinate theme-producing category. Hence, it is these units that constitute the focus of this article—preschool teachers' ways of experiencing play and its variations.

Validity, Reliability, and Generalization

Within phenomenography, validity and reliability describe to what extent the categories of conceptions correspond to the participants' conceptions. Our starting point has been that the preschool teachers described their experiences in order to create an understanding of play in childhood. Reliability, carefulness, and validity are supported by two criteria: the categories are illustrated with quotations from the interviews, and a co-examiner insured that the categories corresponded to the statements in the interviews (Larsson, 1986; Alexandersson, 1994). This approach implies that in this study quotations had two meanings—to illustrate the results and to give the reader a chance to judge the reasonableness of the interpretation. In this study, both authors, independently of each other, analyzed the interviews. Preliminary results from the study were also discussed with other researchers.

Alexandersson (1994) emphasizes that generalization in the phenomenographical tradition means that the phenomenon shall fulfill as many qualities as possible. Following this tradition, the present study has a variation range in the selection of the material (see discussion of sampling strategy). Strategic considerations were made during the selection of preschool teachers in order to identify qualitatively different experiences. These considerations were made from the conception that the context in which one exists is of importance to the experiences one has.

Results

On a general analysis level, it became obvious that the preschool teachers described their own childhood play as being exceptionally gender stereotyped. The men described how as boys they engaged in rule-based play (e.g., football, ice hockey, hunting), while the women described how as girls they engaged in role-play (e.g., playing with dolls, keeping store, and playing with horses). Some of the men and some of the women described a "secret" play world, something that occurred outside the adult visible world. All of the preschool teachers in the study shared the view that outdoor play was much more common in their own childhoods than it is for children today and put great emphasis on that fact.

The analysis of the interviews with the preschool teachers also showed great variation in conceptions with regard to their own childhood play and children's play today. These two different conceptions

characterizing the preschool teachers' views have been labeled "the idealized" and "the pragmatic" perspectives.

The Idealized View

Preschool teachers who held this view said that ideal play was their own play from childhood. They related play to "the child as nature" (Dahlberg & Lenz-Taguchi, 1994; Lenz-Taguchi, 1997). In this view, play is perceived as an expression of children's inherent need to express themselves through play—something that is natural and needing an outlet. The interviewed preschool teachers tended to concentrate on circumstances that pointed out that play is not the same today, and they used their own childhoods as a norm for what should be seen as natural. They often focused on external conditions for play, such as large groups of children and shortages of staff, as reasons for the shortcomings in today's play. They perceived changes in society (e.g., watching TV and using computers) as dangerous. They also claimed that one way to develop children's play is to limit the children's use of toys in preschool. Implicitly, they expressed that children's play used to be better in those days when children did not have as many toys as they do today, because they believed toys prevented children's natural fantasy:

> We just don't take out that many toys.... There are buckets, spades, and toy cars. If they don't want to play with these, they just make up their own games and play around the bushes. (Male preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

Similarities could be seen here between this perspective and a Piagetian perspective, in which play is described as having a biological foundation, within which children play in ways that are typical or necessary for a specific age. Children assimilate their experiences to a level or a way of being and thinking that corresponds to their age. There is something, given by nature, for each age that is general and stable and that transcends both culture and time (Piaget, 1962). By letting children have experiences that are appropriate to their age, they can be expected to reach the next developmental level.

The Pragmatic View

The teachers who expressed a more pragmatic conception of play believed that children's play today is no different from the kind of play that they engaged in when they were children. They regarded children's play as an expression of culture, something that is constituted and created within the culture and therefore appears differently in different periods of time and in different societies. Preschool teachers who held this view recognized themselves in the children's games. They reflected upon themselves and exhibited a better understanding and awareness of the impact that play has on children's development. Furthermore, they were open to new perspectives.

Similarities could be seen here between the pragmatic thoughts of the preschool teachers and the ones of Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) stresses the importance of children's creation and play. Play is regarded as interpretations of the situations of everyday life. In play, children interpret their experiences and give them life. By dramatizing, they transform and exaggerate their experiences by bringing out what is typical. Imitation is of great importance in children's play. In play, children tell a story, and play and story telling are closely related. Vygotsky ([1930] 1990; 1995) emphasizes that children's play often serves as a reenactment of what they have seen and heard from adults; however, in play, the child processes these experiences creatively. These impressions are combined, and a new reality, which corresponds to the children's own needs and interests, is created. Vygotsky (([1930] 1990; 1995) also points out that the cultural reality children live in influences them. He stresses that humans always are children of their own time and environment. The motive and the core of play are the same, but the external conditions separate play in earlier times from today's play.

Similarities and differences stand out when it comes to how preschool teachers see today's play in the light of their own childhood. Above all, one can say that the pictures are not complete; the same person can give expression for both an idealization and at the same time be pragmatic, even if there are examples of more complete perspectives among the interviewed preschool teachers. What is worth noticing is that an

idealized perspective is more common among the teachers.

Figure 1 illustrates the two themes that stand out as significant in preschool teachers' play experiences: time for play and the role of media. These themes and some categories will be described in the light of the idealized and pragmatic perspectives. In Figure 1, the themes and categories are summarized, and they are further developed in the following sections.

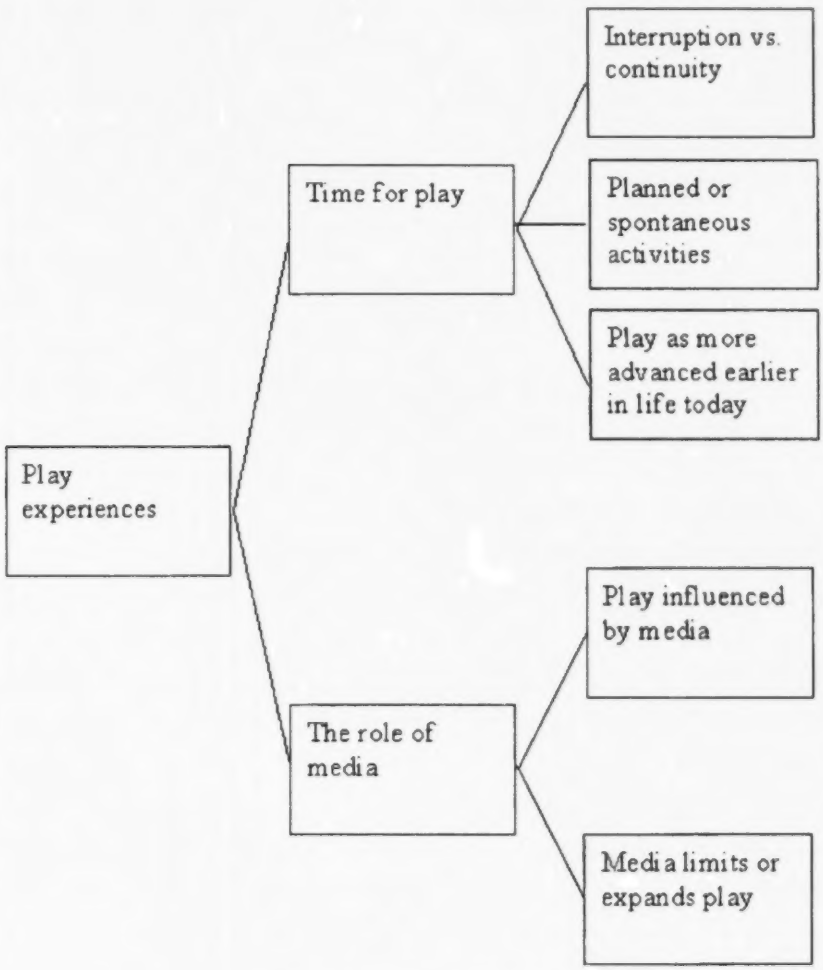
Play experiences
Time for play
Interruption vs. continuity
Planned or spontaneous activities
Play as more advanced earlier in life today
The role of media
Play influenced by media
Media limits or expands play

Figure 1. Categories of play common to all participants.

Time for Play

In the preschool teachers' statements, the theme "time for play" is expressed as three different categories. In all these, the time becomes related to different external factors, which influence children's play today in different ways. The different categories are (1) interruption versus continuity, (2) planned or spontaneous activities, and (3) more advanced play earlier in life than in the past. These categories are to some extent linked to each other, but even so, the preschool teachers focus on different categories.

Interruption versus Continuity

In this category, it is emphasized that it is the preschool organization that often causes interruptions during time used for play. These interruptions are caused by routines that both the preschool teachers with an idealized perspective and some teachers with a more pragmatic perspective emphasized. Almost all preschool teachers claimed that they used to have time to finish their play when they were children. Many of them also claimed that they often engaged in the same play for several days:

> It is the aspect of time.... What I remember, we had all the time in the world to play. One remembers the very long days; there was nothing that stressed, such as going away for other activities. An exception was lunch when grandmother shouted that one should come and eat, and when there were snacks between meals. I had no activities that I remember, maybe swimming or something in the evenings. (Female preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

As we can see, this teacher focused on the continuity, but we can also see that she is comparing her childhood to that of today's children, who live very structured lives (see also next category).

One of the female preschool teachers with a pragmatic perspective said that her own experiences of play had influenced her view of play, because she had time to play without interruption in her childhood:

> Teacher: I had the time to play since my mother was a housewife so one had the entire day to oneself and there were no early mornings. I had the time to play, and based on that, I think it is important that children have time to play even if they are here and not at home.
>
> Interviewer: Yes, what do you do to give them that time?
>
> Teacher: One thing is that we try to plan the day in such a way that we have a longer period of time during which they have time to start up something. Then the most important thing is to have several longer periods during the day when they can continue. (Female preschool teacher with a pragmatic perspective)

This teacher explained that her experience of continuous play from her childhood made her deliberately plan the days at preschool in order to allow for fewer interruptions during the time that is set aside for children's play.

In these two examples, we see how the teachers agree on a memory of continuity in play from their own childhood, although in the first example, the teacher related her expression to the fact that children are involved in too many activities today (a more negative view), while the other teacher tried to arrange continuity for the children at her preschool (a more positive view).

Some of the preschool teachers who had the idealized perspective emphasized that the children disturb each other during play and that interruptions occur all the time, due to the coordination with other activities in the preschool:

> In my opinion, children do not play anymore; they do not have the opportunity to play the same thing for long, so it becomes ever so short. Maybe they play for 15 or 10 minutes with the same thing, then they are interrupted or disturbed. When there are many children, more and more children come and want to take part, and you are disturbed. (Female preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

Some of the preschool teachers, however, tried to arrange for continuity:

> We think that they learn so much from play, so we give them time to play, not steering the activities all the time. We have tried to plan assembly and story time [so that children]...do not have to interrupt their play in order to tidy up. (Female preschool teacher with a pragmatic perspective)

As we can see from the above, some teachers thought children have restricted play opportunities, and the cause is very much intertwined with the way in which preschool activities are organized and the fact that there are too many children grouped together for play. In the first example above, we can see how the external prerequisites become an obstacle to a natural way to play, while in the second example, the external prerequisites are changed in order to support children's play. In this category, we also notice that the teachers said that today's children do not often play the same game for long. These are all the result of the children's environment, and this situation is deemed to be wrong—because children need continuity in order to be able to play the kind of games they prefer. Both the preschool teachers with an idealized perspective and those with a pragmatic perspective expressed this view, but those with a pragmatic perspective seem to do something about the situation. On the other hand, the teachers also gave examples from their own childhood of when a larger group of children played together:

> Then, we were very many children who sometimes, some evenings got together and actually could play together, everybody in our block could come together, doing such things that I never have seen today. There were games such as The Red and White Rose, and that was exciting because we were all of many different ages. Those who we didn't use to be together with that much, there were some older boys. X and his friends, who probably were five or six years older than us were leading the game. In those times, everybody in our block were together, we had the whole block as a playground, we sneaked around the backyards and the bushes, it was so exciting that sometimes, I recall, I had to go up to the apartment just to relax and hide. (Male preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

> Well, I can see it here in the area, in the evenings, there are quite a lot of children from primary and secondary school, and there they play some thrilling mischievous games, probably right on the border to what is allowed, boys and girls; it could be something like The Red and the White Rose and similar games, they run around in gangs like that, here in this area anyhow. I've seen that. That's great fun, one remembers, actually, yes... (Male preschool teacher with a pragmatic perspective)

The preschool teacher who had the idealized perspective suggested that many children used to play together in the area, while the preschool teacher who had the pragmatic perspective believed that children do so even today. Some of the preschool teachers who had the pragmatic perspective noted that there are advantages for children who attend preschool, because it gives them opportunities to play with many different children:

> They have more children to turn to here in preschool; if one friend doesn't suit them, they can play with some other, or there is an adult.... There is a greater choice ... more children, so the opportunities I think children have, I mean, more children have the right to good play and to get time to play, within preschool anyway, are greater now than when I was a child. (Male preschool teacher with a pragmatic perspective)

The fact that many children play together is seen both as something positive and something negative. The playing of spontaneous outdoor games is regarded as something quite natural. However, the preschool teachers who idealized their own childhood considered the large group to be a problem when large groups of children played together indoors. The teachers who had the pragmatic perspective, on the other hand, had a more positive view in this respect.

Planned or Spontaneous Activities

The most apparent thing in this category is that both preschool teachers who had a pragmatic perspective and teachers who had an idealized perspective thought that time often is controlled by activities and that parents feel that children must be active at all times, even during their leisure time:

> I wish that I had some more peace, so that I do not feel so scattered. Parents think that something must happen all of the time, otherwise you are a bad parent. I strongly believe that one must have time to play, to have the time to start play. I believe some children think that there is no point in starting playing because they are interrupted all the time with sports

> or something else. I think that this free time, to go around and do nothing, is a big difference compared to when I was a child. How do you know when you have fun, if you are not bored once in a while? What I remember from my childhood is that Saturdays and Sundays were boring. On Sundays, we were expected to not play but be dressed up and go to one's grandmother for coffee and then visit the Sunday school. I had no brothers or sisters, so I often sat and looked out of the window since TV did not exist. I think that children today cannot stand to be bored, because then their parents think that there is something wrong. I think this is what is lacking, just this, I think it is an advantage to be a little bored sometimes. (Female preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

This view indicates that children do not have the same amount of time for play today, because they have more activities on both weekdays and weekends. When the preschool teachers grew up, play was more spontaneous, and organized activities were rare. This view implies that they could play for longer periods of time, which was the focus in the category presented earlier. The difference this time is that this category focuses on the activities as such. However, in both cases, the interviewed teachers' interpretations of these circumstances result in the same assumption—that today's children cannot exercise their own natural play, because doing so seems to be something that presupposes a longer period of time.

Teachers also connected the planned activities to more stress in society in general, which they believe is reflected in children's play. Both preschool teachers who had the pragmatic perspective and teachers who had the idealized perspective pointed out that parents are more stressed today because both parents work, and they work longer days compared with their parents when they were children. The preceding statement is puzzling because working hours have decreased officially. The teachers perceive that children have been influenced by parents' hectic lives. Characteristic of this category is that both preschool teachers who had the pragmatic perspective and teachers who had the idealized perspective emphasized that they remembered their childhood years as more peaceful and less stressful. Today, they believe, children are active the entire day:

> Then one fills these holes with TV and there are activities all the time, and all the time is passive. In reality, it is passive, but something has to move all the time, and it must move in front of your eyes; it is never quiet. I think this stresses the children.... One thing that we have here in our preschool is that when they have played for a whole day, or been here a whole day, most of them bring a pal home after preschool. This is something that we have noticed the last couple of years. We wonder if they have enough energy for this, and if the parents have enough energy for it, but by taking a friend with you home, you fill the hole between getting home and dinnertime. The children will never have time to ease off, so this does not only have advantages. (Female preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

Here we can see that the preschool teacher thinks that the children's activities steer their lives in a stressful way. Children are a part of society, but it is not natural for them to live with this stress. What she appears to regard as natural for children is a much more spontaneous and unplanned life.

Play as More Advanced Earlier in Life Today

In this category, teachers perceived that children play during a shorter period in life. Something else worth noting is that the interviewees recalled playing more than today's children. Some preschool teachers who had the idealized perspective perceived that children today start playing some games earlier in life, for example, games such as cowboys and Indians. This change can either be viewed as something negative, as many of the preschool teachers who had the idealized perspective thought, or as something positive, as those who had the pragmatic perspective thought:

> I think it has changed quite a lot. I think that a lot of the games that we played then, if you can compare the way we played Indians and cowboys. I think such games come in at an earlier stage nowadays. From what I can recall, we did not play that type of game that early; it is maybe due to TV and things they see.... As I remember, we were 6, 7, 8 years old before we began playing that way, before that we were not influenced by such violence, yes, what is it called? I think that TV is affecting quite a lot after all, because the children's

> programs we used to watch were very pedagogical. You never got in contact with such things as Kimmon, Turtles, and others that actually are a type of fighting game. Therefore I claim that it comes earlier; I cannot remember that I played such games when I was 3 or 4 years old. Programs like Batman and Zorro did not exist, so you played more peaceful games. (Male preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

This preschool teacher seems to have a negative image of how TV makes children play more violent games. He believes also that this sort of exposure starts much earlier today than in the past. The preschool teachers who had the idealized perspective said that children stop playing at a much younger age today. They attribute this change to TV, computers, and leisure activities. They believe that children move into the adult world earlier today and interpret this situation as negative for children. The preschool teachers seem to agree that this situation threatens the children's healthy development because the natural thing would be for them to play longer. Thus, they blame today's culture, which they believe does not facilitate natural play:

> I think about all that jump skipping-rope and twisting that we did in school. What you see today is that the children that jump skipping-rope and twist at the school in X are about 6 years old. This has changed a lot, because we were 10, 11, 12 years when we did that. We played with Barbie dolls when we were 10 years old, but I do not think a lot of 10-year-olds play with them nowadays. I think this is a big change, and today they are given Barbie dolls when they are 3 years old. Today, you have dollhouses when you are 2 years old and Barbie dolls when you are 3 years old, and it is amazing that the ages have lowered so much for things like this. Today, you start with make-up when you are 10 to 12 years old and that is early compared to when we started. It is a big thing that has happened, and I think it is very much due to us adults, because a 3-year-old does not buy a Barbie doll for her friend as a birthday present. (Female preschool teacher with a pragmatic perspective)

The above illustrates that many teachers feel that expectations for children have changed. According to the interviewees, it is the adults, both preschool teachers and parents, who indirectly have caused the reduced playtime for children.

The following shows another dimension—teachers claim that when they were children, children were given greater responsibility early in life. All sports and games took place without the involvement of adults or leaders:

> We made up sides without adult interference, and so we started the sport in the playground and played matches and so on. There was nobody telling us that now you are in this team or that team. But today, you don't see one single kid in the playground I used to grow up with, because today they go to special training activities where the adults lead them all the time. That makes me believe, one cannot generalize, but I think that partly this is reflected in other play as well. (Male preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

According to the teachers interviewed, playing outdoors gave a feeling of freedom, a freedom from adult interference and a freedom to move around in the local area:

> We played pretty freely; we moved around in rather large areas, I think, but I was small.... We lived pretty free, when we were outside, we were pretty much on our own, actually. There were no adults out playing with us, that was quite a fostering I believe.... When we played freely with our pals outdoors, and it was freedom, we had spaces to move in, which we didn't have indoors.... We played among the bushes, and there was some woodland with stones—that was freedom. (Female preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

Many teachers thought that in the past there were more quiet games indoors, as a consequence of the limited space in people's homes. Consequently, there were more outdoor games:

> What I remember most is that we stayed outdoors a lot. Well, if we stayed indoors, we

> mostly played quiet games, paper-dolls, but it was so cramped so I think that's why we preferred to be outdoors.... We were not allowed to run around indoors, or to be mischievous, or even bring many friends; if one was allowed to bring a friend, it was often just one.... There was no space for play, no private rooms, and not that many toys. I remember I had a cupboard in the kitchen where I kept my toys. We played much more lively games outdoors. (Female preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

The Role of Media

Based on the preschool teachers' statements about children's play, it is obvious they believe that we live in a media-influenced society. Modern media and technology are highlighted both as inspirers and as something bad and hazardous to children's future. All of the interviewed preschool teachers seemed to agree that media influence the manner in which children play.

Play Influenced by Media

Both teachers with an idealized perspective and teachers with a pragmatic perspective noted that today's play is influenced by media in different ways, most notably when it comes to scary elements such as violence, which forces children to spend a lot of time discussing what they have seen and heard. When the preschool teachers were children, experiences of violence from TV and computer games were not an issue, because this kind of media did not exist:

> Teacher: Often they sort of get rid of what they have seen on TV by acting out in play; when I was a child, I did not watch TV that much, but one realizes that they do nowadays and that they play what they see a lot. They probably relieve themselves through play in a different way today.
>
> Interviewer: You didn't do that when you used to play?
>
> Teacher: Certainly, but I lived in sort of another reality; I probably didn't need to work through the TV violence as they do today; the games that children play these days are somewhat tougher. (Female preschool teacher with a pragmatic perspective)

A distinction between the pragmatic and the idealized perspectives became apparent. The preschool teachers who had the idealized perspective felt commercial influence had a negative effect on children's play (e.g., Disney selling movie characters as toys). The preschool teachers who had the pragmatic perspective argued that children get inspiration from the movie characters and that they, for example, do their own versions of these characters:

> When I was young, we were inspired by comic books and such things, there was not really any inspiration directly from TV.... Today, it is totally different. A lot of other sources of inspiration are available, through TV, toyshops, and McDonalds' games, which all exert an enormous influence, and all children are aware of all those sources of inspiration. When I was young, we had "Televinken," and we did not ask others about it because not all of us had a TV, so it was completely different. I must say that today's situation also has some positive aspects. You cannot stop the development of society, and there are some powerful commercial forces.... Despite this, children develop variations on different subjects. They can play Batman and Spiderman, but still it is "I am daddy Batman and you are mummy Batman." It becomes the same play as when we were young, but the setting is different. I think the contents in a role-play have not changed much, especially when it comes to relational problems, to move all the gadgets and collect things are some things which have not changed much over the years. They may use different names and might be a little different, but the basics and the meaning of role-play, and also the structure and other things, I think this is all fairly identical. (Male preschool teacher with a pragmatic perspective)

Some preschool teachers also expressed a view that media have positive effects on children's play. Some of the preschool teachers with a pragmatic perspective saw computer and TV games as positive because they encourage cooperation:

> We have considered that from a social perspective it inspires contacts that would not have been made otherwise, so we have seen that several of them have come to know each other. They never would have chosen to play with that person otherwise, but now they have made that contact because that is what is appealing to them. Thereafter, they have also been able to find each other during the day. (Female preschool teacher with a pragmatic perspective)

Media Limits or Expands Play

There were some similarities in this category between the preschool teachers with idealized perspectives and teachers with pragmatic perspectives of how media limits children's play. For example, both groups stressed that outdoor play and physical play are limited because children are indoors more often than in the past and play computer and TV games.

The difference between the preschool teachers in this category was that only the preschool teachers who had the idealized perspective stated that children do not use their imaginations. A female preschool teacher argued that children are restricted in their fantasy play because of the influence of media:

> I think today's children lack freedom; they do not have the same fantasy. You hardly ever hear children fantasize over such free fantasies. It is controlled in some way by what they can see on TV, tied to some rules of how to play. (Female preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

The preschool teachers seem to look at media as an obstacle that has created children's lack of fantasy and, furthermore, as an obstacle to children being physically active.

Many of the teachers believed that through media children develop their knowledge about letters and mathematical thinking:

> Teacher: Well, there are a lot of media and computers around us, so I think they learn from that too. I'm absolutely not against that, in any way, quite the contrary.
>
> Interviewer: What do they learn?
>
> Teacher: They can learn letters and mathematical thinking and colors and all sorts of things.... And then I believe that it is useful, there is more and more of it in society so, but as I said, sparingly, it's important to be outdoors too. The best kind of play takes place outdoors. (Female preschool teacher with a pragmatic perspective)

Discussion

From what point of view do the preschool teachers regard play today? Is it principally from experiences from their childhood? Halldén (2001) highlights the importance of discussing one's childhood. To the question: "How do you think that your own experiences of play have influenced you?" one of the female preschool teachers in the study emphasized:

> I have not thought about that earlier, but before I came to this interview I gave it a lot of thought and it has influenced me more than I have understood. (Female preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

It is astonishing that educated preschool teachers have not thought about the relationship between their own childhood experiences and how they think about children's childhood experiences today. Their lack of reflection maybe the reason so many of them idealized their own childhood. The more teachers idealized their own play experiences, the more negative they were to the manner in which children play today.

What changes can be seen in play according to the preschool teachers in this study? In general, both the preschool teachers who had an idealized perspective and teachers who had a pragmatic perspective said that outdoor play has declined in both quantity and quality. They view this decline as due to children's lack of time for free play, too many interruptions and organized activities, and media's influence. Evans (1995) claims that more research is necessary to determine whether "children play less or play differently today" (p. 17). His thoughts are that television and organized activities influence play. This view corresponds to the results found in this study. Evans talks about television, although in this study, the teachers also refer to computer and TV games. The preschool teachers interviewed also pointed out that even the kind of organized activities that are arranged by parents and siblings have limited children's time for play:

> ...even parents do things during their leisure time. Now we hate to go home and have dinner, because then mummy has to go away to this and that. (Female preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

Another prominent finding of our study is that teachers perceived that children today spent shorter time outdoors than teachers did as children. In studies by Sandberg (2001; in press) and Tammemäe-Orr and Sandberg (2002), adults predominantly drew outdoor environments when they were asked to illustrate play memories from their childhood. What is confusing about this perspective is that the children they talk about are their own children in preschool, and if there is something that Swedish preschools are known for, it is that they take children outdoors no matter what the weather conditions. Why is outdoor play so important for Swedish preschool teachers? Probably because of the shared assumption that children become healthier the more time they spend outdoors. On the other hand, many children live in cities, which are very polluted.

As we also noticed in the results, many teachers talked about a secret play world. Scientists (Cooper Marcus, 1978, 1992; Hart, 1979; Dovey, 1990; Sobel, 1990, 1993; Francis, 1995) are of the opinion that secret places are dominating features of childhood environments. In Sandberg's article (in press), one can find that the woods are experienced as a secret place up to age 18. A question that could be asked is how do children today get access to the woods, when teachers point out that today there are a lot of interruptions during play and many routines that disturb play. A secret play world is "best" when left undisturbed. There must be a balance between preschool routines and children's opportunities for play. Preschool teachers are role models for children; what teachers do and say as well as their attitudes influence them. We agree with Bardy (1999) that childhood always has to be rediscovered. This reflection should be done out of consideration for the children and also in order to increase our understanding of human beings.

Sommer (1997) notes that there have been changes in society and that new norms have developed. The difference between preschool teachers who had a pragmatic perspective and teachers who had an idealized perspective is that those with a pragmatic perspective are open to new perspectives when it comes to technical development and do not regard such development as something that limits children's play. One possible explanation for this view could be that the preschool teachers with a pragmatic perspective were the youngest teachers in the study. The teachers who had the pragmatic perspective see children as co-creators of culture and knowledge, and themselves as co-constructors of culture and knowledge (Dahlberg & Lenz-Taguchi, 1994; Lenz-Taguchi, 1997). Even though they stated that media cause commercial influence, they find such influence positive, because the children invent their own variations of the characters. They start from the children's own world and are aware of the great importance of children's need to learn new technology.

In contrast, the preschool teachers who had an idealized perspective see children as part of nature. They believe that children must be protected from the influence of the media and that children do not use their imaginations because of the media. Their view of the media is negative, and they believe that preschool teachers cannot protect children from computers and the new knowledge society. Are the preschool teachers expressing prejudice against parents, or are they reflecting their own experience with their children

at home? Earlier, there were no TV programs during the day, not as many TV channels, and not as many TV games, which also implies that children in the past did not get as much inspiration from TV as they do today. However, there are not many preschools where they watch TV while in school, and computers are a recent phenomenon in Swedish preschools. If they have computers, there is normally just one per group, so the children cannot spend many minutes per day at the computer. Sandberg's study (2002) showed that even if children use the new technology, this use does not necessarily mean that time for play decreases. Instead, as Evans (1995) argues, it could be that other activities, for example, reading, have decreased in importance.

What do the preschool teachers' images of play mean for their everyday work with preschool children? Is it that the children's competence is not utilized? Some of the literature (see, for example, Ministry of Education, 1998) suggests that teachers start with the children and take their perspective; but this approach does not always work in reality (Sheridan, 2001b). During the 1990s, there were large reductions in the area of child care (larger groups of children and reductions in staff), which affected preschool teachers' work. There is less time for reflection these days:

> We are more or less deep-rooted here ... but this is really progress, when things are changing, when you start thinking like this. It is really this type of question that you are asking that should be asked all the time within the team, questioning. (Male preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

How can play have such a central role in preschools and at the same time hardly be reflected upon by teachers? Results from this study suggest that the assumption that play has major importance in preschools is a myth. Its importance is something that is described in theory, but reality does not seem to reflect its importance:

> Sometimes one feels a bit guilty, if one just lets them play. (Female preschool teacher with an idealized perspective)

There must be a change of attitudes, so that play is considered to have pedagogical value. Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson's (2001) study shows that children regard play as the most preferred activity in preschool.

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Author Information

Anette Sandberg, Ph.D., is a lecturer at Malardalens University, Sweden. She is also a research assistant at LEGO Learning Institute. Her research interests are in early childhood education, especially play, the experiences of preschool teachers from different areas, and early intervention.

Anette Sandberg, Ph.D.
Malardalens University
Department of Social Sciences
P.O. Box 883
SE-721 23 Vasteras
Sweden
Telephone: +46 21 10 14 04
Fax: +46 21 10 13 90
Email: anette.sandberg@mdh.se

Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson is a professor and coordinator for early childhood education at the Department of Education, Göteborg University, Sweden. She has a background as a preschool teacher and got the first chair in early childhood education in Sweden in 1996. Her research mainly deals with how children create meaning and make sense of different aspects of the surrounding world, in the context of preschool (day care and kindergarten). Another research interest is teachers' professional development. Professor Pramling Samuelsson has been consulted by the Ministry of Education, the National Agency for Education, and the Department of Social Welfare and Health concerning questions about children.

Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson, Professor
Göteborg University
Department of Education
P.O. Box 300
SE-405 30 Göteborg
Sweden
Telephone:+46 31 773 2461
Fax: +46 31 773 2391
Email: ingrid.pramling@ped.gu.se

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